

WHAT IS A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

The Statement of Purpose is the single most important part of your application that will tell the admissions committee who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests and where you plan to go from here.

As the name signifies, the Statement of Purpose is your personal statement about who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests and where you plan to go from here. It need not be a bald statement of facts; several successful SoPs address these questions through anecdotes, stories or by describing their hero. But whether your SoP is subtle or to the point, it must be well written to be successful.

This is because the SoP is the only part of your application packet over which you have full control. Your academic and extra-curricular records are in the past. Most people only take one or two shots at the GMAT, GRE or TOEFL, and these scores could be adversely affected by conditions on the test day. It is important to choose recommendation letter writers carefully, but while you hope they give you the best possible recommendation, this is not within your control.

The SoP is your chance to talk directly to the admissions committee. To make yourself stand out from among a multitude of similarly qualified candidates. To convince the committee that you have the spark, the thirst for knowledge that could add value to your class.

Most of us work hard for the standard tests - the GRE, GMAT, TOEFL and others. We attend classes or peruse study aids. We give practice tests and do everything within our power to aim for the highest possible score. Because we know that these test scores, while not a perfect tool, are crucial to our chances of gaining admission and even a scholarship or assistantship.

The SoP or essay, on the other hand, is put off till the last possible moment. It scares us when we look at those oh-so-perfect essay examples in the admissions guidebooks and wonder how we can ever write so well. Or wonder what shining instance we can pick out of our normal, average lives to show that we are unique and remarkable. Or how to pick our way through the minefield of endless Do's and Don'ts. Or, after overcoming all these obstacles, we falter at the seemingly endless revisions, wondering if this latest draft is good enough (If I read that essay once more, I'll scream!). Finally we write something, because time's a-pressing and we have to meet the application deadline. We do our best, juggling the writing process with the last-minute paraphernalia of applying-checking forms for errors and completeness, collating the application packets, making sure transcripts, recommendations, work samples and resumes go in their right envelopes, worrying about transit times. We feel thankful when the essay is over, do a quick scan for obvious mistakes, and send it on its way.

If you do it this way, you are practically throwing away your chances of admission. A good SoP will certainly improve your chances of getting admission to the school of your choice, and even compensate for weaker portions of your application such as less-than-perfect grades. A bad SoP, on the other hand, has the potential to drag down an otherwise strong application.

If you plan correctly, you can give yourself enough time to submit a well-written, thoughtful, polished essay that will boost your chances for admission. Equally important, this is a great opportunity to look inside yourself and be rewarded by a better understanding of who you are.

Writing a reasonably good Statement of Purpose is not an impossible task. It requires care, attention and patience. And enough time for you to be able to write several drafts, show them to people and polish the essay till you get a version you are happy with.

Done right, this will even turn out to be an enjoyable process. And you will be the richer for it. Read on.

WHAT DO COLLEGES LOOK FOR IN A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

The primary question admissions committee members ask themselves when they read a Statement of Purpose is: What does this essay tell me about the person who wrote it?

Put yourself in an admission officer's shoes. From among thousands of applications, you have to choose the fraction of students that will comprise next year's incoming class. A mix of interesting, confident and enthusiastic people who will make the class a stimulating place. Academic achievements and good test scores are important. But in an era where the majority of applicants have good academic records, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between individuals and decide who gets the offer of admission.

When you apply, each of the items in the application packet -recommendations, extra-curricular achievements, work samples - adds an extra dimension to your personality. But it is the SoP that brings you to life. Which is why each essay is read carefully by at least two and often four or five people before a decision is taken on the application.

Does this mean that the SoP is the main deciding factor? No. Your academic record, grades and the courses you took- are the first section admission committee members turn to. Standardized test scores are useful to know where you stand in the applicant pool. For graduate schools, relevant work or academic experience is important. Being from a reputed school or college confers a distinct advantage. What your teachers or boss think of you goes

a long way towards the school's opinion. A good work sample can show your creativity, skill and professionalism.

However, only the SoP or application essays can bring out your uniqueness. And therefore make or break your application. An applicant who does not take the essay seriously is throwing away the best opportunity available.

So are the admission officers looking for specific personality sorts? Well, yes and no. Creativity, curiosity, pride in your work, an enthusiasm for learning, a capacity for teamwork, the ability to think independently and so on are all good attributes, and most of us share these in varying proportions. But what schools look for is a mix of individuals that together, form a well-balanced class. This would include several personality types.

It is good to go through the school's brochure or web site, speak to people about it, visit if that is possible; get a feel of the student mix that they look for and decide if this is the school for you. However, trying to tailor your SoP to reflect what you think the school is looking for is dangerous business. The people who read your application have been doing so for years and are skilled at spotting fakes. They are likely to know soon if a particular author is saying something for effect or if an essay does not ring true. And that means almost certain rejection.

What is this, you might ask. Of course we want to have an effect on the admissions officers. The important thing is to do so without appearing dishonest. If, for instance, you talk about your deep desire to make society a better place, your application should reflect it. Have you done anything about this desire? Can you talk about your actions and experiences? A small example of something you did, not necessarily spectacular, can do more towards boosting your chances than the noblest platitude can.

Don't try to be something you are not. Don't try to tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Be honest, look inside yourself and do your best.

Which brings us to the next point - self-knowledge. The people who read your essay want to be convinced that you have thought long and hard about who you are, what are the things you appreciate, what inspires you. What you want out of life, and where you are going from here. It is not necessary to have all the answers. After all, several admirable people have no idea where they are going even at age 40 or 50. It is necessary to show that you have thought about this. And that these life experiences have taught you something.

Finally, you have to show a desire to learn. From your books and teachers, from your classmates, from music or art, from life itself.

POLISHING - THE 'IN THEIR SHOES' CHECK

Put your essay away for a day or two. When you take it out, lay it face down for two minutes while you put yourself in the admissions committee's place. Imagine yourself to be a professor or graduate student who is going through a few hundred applications and classifying them into 'yes', 'maybe' and 'no' piles. Think of how you would look at SoPs and try to read yours through a stranger's eyes. What do you see?

- Remember that for graduate school, your essay need not be great writing. What the school is looking for is a competently written statement of goals and interests that demonstrates how you think, whether you have thought through this decision to apply, and whether your interests and strengths fit in with the program you are applying to. To this end, they expect to see the following in an essay –
 - What areas are you interested in and why,
 - How well defined your interests are,
 - Are these interests based on experience (academic or on the job) that the school may find useful,
 - Where do you see these interests taking you,
 - How do you think graduate school will help you,
 - What experience have you had that will help.

Does your essay cover these points? Does it do so in an honest and interesting manner? Many of the students applying will have backgrounds similar to yours, so avoid cliched ideas.

- Are you repeating information that is available from the resume? Do so very sparingly, and only if you are making a point about your learnings or achievements during that experience. Weed out all other information that sounds like repetition (it will only irritate the reader), or can be included in your resume, or does not actively contribute towards making a point in your essay.
- Does your essay have an interesting beginning? This need not be witty, but should persuade the reader to stay with you.
- Have you talked about specific incidents that illustrate your interest or familiarity with the subject, or show something about you? These incidents might include, for example:
 - A college or work project that was instrumental in confirming your interest in the field (be sure to include a recommendation from your guide!),
 - Extra-curricular activities that brought out useful aspects in you (leadership skills or team activities are particularly helpful for business school applications!),
 - A book or person who had a strong influence on you.

- Does the essay bring out your personality? Or could it have been written by just about anybody?
- Have you mentioned why you are applying to that particular school? Does this section of the essay demonstrate that you have researched the school and the program? DON'T stop at the standard formula phrase, 'I am applying to XYZ because of it's great reputation in _____.'
- Does your essay flow smoothly? If it is choppy and abruptly jumps from paragraph to paragraph, your readers will have a tough time keeping up. Make it easy on them – smoothen the transition between paragraphs.
- Is the tone too formal or not formal enough? Be professional yet informal – the tone you would take with your Principal or Head of Department, for instance.

Does the essay end well?

POLISHING - SHOWING YOUR STUFF AROUND

It is essential to show your SoP to a few people whose opinion you respect – an English teacher from school, a professor, an older friend, a parent or a relative. Include among these, 2-3 people who know you well. Ask your readers to pay particular attention to the following points:

- The beginning and the end – do they hold interest?
 - The logical and smooth flow of ideas – does each paragraph smoothly give way to the next?
 - The structure – does each paragraph bring home a central idea and contribute to the overall 'feel' of the essay? Are the paragraphs in proper positions?
 - The style and language – are they appropriate and consistent? Does the essay have too many cliches? Does it repeat particular words or phrases too often? Does it have too many superlatives?
 - The tone – is it unnecessarily boastful or overly modest?
 - The quality of the essay – is it boring? Does it bring out the writer's personality? Does it include superfluous information? Or conversely, are there incidents or aspects the essay should mention?
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- Ask your readers to write their comments on the essay. Also, spend some time discussing it with them. Listen to their suggestions carefully but remember that this is your essay. You don't have to implement every suggestion, only those that make sense to you. Does it leave the reader with a sense of completion? Avoid usage of cliches like, 'I hope the admissions committee finds my application up to their expectations'.

This self-check will yield a few ideas for improvement. Use it at least 3-4 times during this last stage of polishing up your SoP.

POLISHING - THE FINAL PRINTOUT

Once you have the final draft ready (you have to stop sometime!), do the following before you take a final printout:

- Run a spelling and grammar check.
- Read the essay carefully two-three times for spelling or grammar errors the program did not detect.
- Look for and correct any anomalies in spacing, font and margins.
- Choose a readable font and size, nothing fancy. Avoid special effects like underlining, boldface and italics (except in the title, if you have one). Don't use colors. Don't use special stationery or your letterhead.
- Make sure that the school and program mentioned in the essay are correct. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.**
- Include a header in the top right-hand corner with your name and the name of the program you are applying to. Use a smaller font size for this.
- Take a rough print and show it to someone else who can read it over carefully for errors and anomalies.
- As far as possible, print out your SoP on a separate sheet of paper. Make sure that the printer cartridge is good enough to print clear, crisp copies. Put in a good-quality sheet of white paper. Keep the printed copy carefully in a folder till you are ready to transfer it to the application envelope.

If you must print or write your essay on the application form itself, take a photocopy of the form. Print or write the essay on the copy first, to ensure that it fits easily in the space provided. If it doesn't, and you don't have the option of attaching more pages, cut portions of the essay to reduce its length. This is painful, but a much better idea than reducing font size to unreadable levels or using tiny, cramped handwriting – the essay should never cause strain while reading. While writing by hand, use a good pen, write slowly and carefully and if necessary, draw light pencil lines on the form to ensure that your letters are uniform and in a straight line

SAMPLE ESSAYS

The sample essays that we have used on this site are actual essays that were authored by applicants to American universities. We haven't altered these essays apart from sections that have been modified to protect the author's identity.

We do not claim that these essays are by any means perfect. They have been chosen to be uploaded because we feel that they contain certain elements that applicants should look out for. There are also numerous aspects that all applicants should avoid. Hence these essays have been critiqued. You can access critiques for each paragraph by clicking on the appropriate button provided alongside the relevant paragraph.

We encourage the users of our site to exercise common sense and discretion while using these essays and their critiques. We strongly advise our users against copying the essays, or parts thereof, since there are numerous services on the internet that allow universities to check essays for suspected plagiarism. One such service is www.plagiarism.org.

We'd advise any user who is tempted to copy-paste parts of these essays to first consult what these services have to offer. In case you do decide to plagiarise these essays, we absolve ourselves of all responsibility for the dire consequences that could (and should) follow. Please remember that these essays are meant to enable you to write better and they're certainly not intended to be short-cuts to application-essay glory.

Example 1:**MBA EXAMPLE ESSAY**

Write a candid description of yourself, stressing those personal qualities, assets, and liabilities that you feel will influence your graduate work. Describe what you consider to be your most important professional and / or academic achievement to date.

If one were to ask my friends to describe me they would describe me as a very pleasant, diverse, active and intelligent woman. I think one of my most distinguishing characteristics is the diversity of experiences I possess. I am a science student with a flair for the arts. I am a woman with technical aptitude and an interest in management. I also have a passion for traveling and understanding different cultures of the world. All these elements have given me a very broad outlook, with varying degrees of knowledge in a range of topics. I strongly believe that although some are not related directly, all these qualities will influence my graduate work.

My Engineering degree has given a strong foundation to my analytical skills since civil designing involves a lot of long, complex and intricate calculations and the application of basic math skills. Over the past four years, I have been working part-time with my family firm, SnMTech Systems. I am also the co-founder and active member with FOE - Friends of the Environment. I have assisted in the installation of Enterprise-wide Resource Planning (ERP) System at Blotech, a major Engineering Company. More than what I have studied in school and college, it has been these experiences that have shaped the person that I am today.

I believe that this unique blend of experiences has made me a woman with an original point of view. This blend has given me a broader perspective to and a good understanding of life and a goal to aim for. Among other things, I have this diversity of experience to offer Utah University. My most substantial accomplishment has been the success of the software upgradation project that I managed at SnMTech Systems Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, where I have been working as a part time Associate Intern - Management Information Systems since 1994.

During the first two years of my work at SnMTech, I had an opportunity to observe and work with the existing system being used. Some of the software packages being used were outdated versions. I have always been in touch with the latest software packages thanks to the powerful PC I have at home and am quite used to working with a Graphical User Interface (GUI) environment. At the office, there was great deal of chaos while preparing reports that involved use of more than one software since compatibility between packages usually posed a problem. The difficulty we faced putting different files together led to the final report appearing rather haphazard sometimes.

I believe in providing and maintaining non-negotiable high standards and service. I recognized that shifting to a newer GUI based software would not only dramatically improve our documentation quality, but also increase productivity at the workplace. Presenting the

pros and cons to the management of the upgradation was a very challenging task. I was asked to prepare a proposal regarding the upgradation of the firm's software. Initially, I imagined this project would be rather simple but it turned out to be among the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

Through a firm-wide survey of operators and several one-on-one discussions of their own preferences and solutions, I found that while everybody wanted an upgradation, they had doubts since they would have to learn a whole set of new skills. In order to prepare a budget, I procured quotations from various vendors and analyzed possible combinations. I realized the necessity of a training course for the operators because most of them were not familiar with the GUI interface. I examined the various training classes that offered private in-house training for the employees. After a detailed analysis, I presented my report to the management in the next meeting. They were pleased with my efforts and pleasantly surprised at the cost of the project since it seemed to be comparatively less than what they had anticipated.

Once I was given the go-ahead, the next hurdle was to implement the proposal and coordinate the upgrading. To avoid any disturbance to the company's work, training sessions were planned after working hours. The upgrading took a week and the training of the operators took another two weeks. The really tough period started once the training personnel left. The management felt that it was my responsibility to see that the operators didn't face any problems once they actually started using the new software packages. I put in 60 to 70-hour weeks for the next three weeks before everyone was comfortable with the new system. While the benefits of using these packages were not immediately tangible, a few months later our clients acknowledged that the quality of the reports we sent them had improved considerably. In fact, a year later our firm decided to upgrade all of its software packages. I consider this to be a tacit compliment for my efforts.

This project required me to believe in myself and in what I thought was good for the company. I had to take a pro-active approach, take the initiative and play a leadership role in motivating people and executing the project to completion. A good manager is one who can figure out where the problem lies, deal with it effectively by involving all the members of the company and improve the overall culture of the company. The problem I saw at SnMTech had to be resolved to sustain the company's image. The fact that I was able to pull off this task alone has boosted my confidence in my abilities.